

Message Text

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43

ACTION AID-59

INFO OCT-01 EA-11 ISO-00 SPC-03 EB-11 SR-02 ORM-03 IO-14

SPM-01 L-03 IGA-02 AGR-20 CIAE-00 DODE-00 INR-10

NSAE-00 PA-04 RSC-01 USIA-15 PRS-01 DRC-01 H-03

COME-00 OMB-01 /166 W

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P 081010Z JAN 74

FM AMEMBASSY VIENTIANE

TO SECSTATE WASHDC PRIORITY 7207

LIMITED OFFICIAL USE SECTION 1 OF 3 VIENTIANE 0139

E.O. 11652: N/A

SUBJECT: PRESS COVERAGE OF ALLEGED SALE OF RICE BY
REFUGEES

REF: A. SECSTATE 002194

B. TOAID A-526

C. USINFO WASHDC R 042051Z

SUMMARY: THE ARBUCKLE, RONK AND AP ARTICLES
APPEAR TO BE FILLED WITH CONJECTURE, EMPLOYING
QUESTIONABLE REFERENCES TO UNVERIFIABLE SOURCES
AND QUOTES AND, THOUGH WE DO NOT ACCUSE THE AUTHORS
OF FABRICATION, THE AMOUNT OF EXAGGERATION BROACHES UPON IT.
END SUMMARY.

1. RECEIVED TEXT OF TAMMY ARBUCKLE WASHINGTON
STAR-NEWS ARTICLE AS REF C. FOLLOWING ARE OUR
COMMENTS ON ARTICLE GEARED TO SPECIFIC STATEMENTS/
ALLEGATIONS IN ARTICLE:

A. ALLEGATION: "THE UNITED STATES IS BEING BILKED...
BY SOME OF LAOS' WAR REFUGEES, THE VERY PEOPLE THE
AID PROGRAM IS DESIGNED TO HELP."

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COMMENT: THE ALLEGATION IS A HIGHLY EXAGGERATED

STATEMENT, A COLORATION AND GENERALIZATION OF ADMITTEDLY (BY ARBUCKLE) ONE OBSERVATION OF REFUGEES IN THE HIN THIT AREA ALONG ROUTE 13 FROM VIENTIANE TO VANG VIENG. ALSO, TO THE BEST OF OUR KNOWLEDGE, HIS SINGLE EXAMPLE IS BASED ON AN OBSERVATION MADE IN MID-NOVEMBER WHEN THE EARLY UPLAND RICE HARVEST WAS NEARING COMPLETION. THE FACTS RELATED TO THE 1973-74 RICE HARVEST AND MEASURES TAKEN BY THE LAO AND U.S. GOVERNMENTS TO INSURE ITS SUSTAINED UTILIZATION ARE AS FOLLOWS:

(1) THE REFUGEE POPULATION BEING SUPPORTED THROUGH JOINT LAO GOVERNMENT/USAID PROGRAMS STOOD AT 378,801 ON OCTOBER 26, 1973. THIS WAS THE PEAK OF THE LAO REFUGEE POPULATION AND RESULTED FROM ESSENTIALLY TWO CAUSES: (1) HEAVY FIGHTING WHICH CAUSED NEW REFUGEES DISPLACEMENTS JUST BEFORE THE FEBRUARY 21, 1973 CEASE-FIRE JUST AFTER THE CEASEFIRE IN ADJUSTING TO THE EFFECTS OF FIERCE PRE-CEASEFIRE HOSTILITIES; AND (2) THE 1972-73 HARVEST WAS ONE OF THE WORST RICE HARVESTS IN MANY YEARS RESULTING IN NOT ONLY SHORTAGES IN LAOS, BUT BASIC GRAIN SHORTAGES WORLDWIDE.

(2) THE LAO GOVERNMENT ON SEPTEMBER 28, 1973--- ANTICIPATING WHAT THEN APPEARED TO BE A VERY GOOD HARVEST -- ISSUED FROM THE MINISTER OF THE INTERIOR A CIRCULAR LETTER TO ALL PROVINCIAL GOVERNORS WHICH INSTRUCTED THE GOVERNORS TO ESTABLISH A RICE HARVEST INSPECTION COMMITTEE IN EACH PROVINCE TO INSPECT THE RICE YIELD REALIZED BY REFUGEES WHO WERE RECEIVING FOOD SUPPORT. THE MINISTERIAL LETTER FURTHER INSTRUCTED THE PROVINCIAL GOVERNORS THAT THEY INFORM THE REFUGEES THAT EACH REFUGEE FAMILY MUST RETAIN SUFFICIENT RICE FROM THIS YEAR'S HARVEST NOT ONLY TO FEED THEMSELVES UNTIL THE NEXT HARVEST, BUT ALSO TO RETAIN SUFFICIENT PADDY RICE SEED TO PLANT THEIR FIELDS FOR THE NEXT GROWING SEASON. THE LETTER ALSO INSTRUCTED PROVINCIAL GOVERNORS TO SPECIFICALLY WARN REFUGEES THAT THOSE REFUGEE FAMILIES WHO HARVESTED SUFFICIENT RICE FOR ONE-YEAR COMSUMPTION BUT WHO NEVERTHELESS SELL THEIR RICE AND THEN REQUEST ASSISTANCE FROM THE GOVERNMENT AFTER HAVING LIMITED OFFICIAL USE

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SOLD IT WILL NOT BE HELPED BY THE GOVERNMENT. UPON CERTIFICATION BY THE PROVINCIAL GOVERNOR, A REFUGEE FAMILY THAT DEMONSTRATES THAT ITS ONE-YEAR REQUIREMENT OF RICE FOR FOOD AND SEED WILL BE RETAINED AND IT HOLDS A SURPLUS BEYOND THE ONE-YEAR REQUIREMENT MAY BE AUTHORIZED TO SELL THE SURPLUS.

TO DATE, THE U.S. MISSION HAS NO REASON TO BELIEVE THAT THE INSTRUCTIONS OF THE MINISTER OF THE INTERIOR

WILL NOT BE HONORED, INCLUDING THE WARNING TO REFUGEES WITH A SUFFICIENT RICE HARVEST THAT IF THEY SELL THEIR RICE AND DO NOT RESERVE ENOUGH FOR THEIR FAMILY NEEDS, THEY WILL NOT BE ASSISTED WHEN THEY RUN OUT.

(3) BASED ON PRELIMINARY BUT CONVINCING SURVEYS OF THE POTENTIALLY HIGH YIELDING 1973-74 RICE HARVEST, REPRESENTATIVES OF THE U.S. MISSION DISCUSSED WITH APPROPRIATE LAO GOVERNMENT OFFICIALS THE STEPS THAT SHOULD BE TAKEN (AND TIMING) TO REDUCE RICE DISTRIBUTION TO REFUGEE GROUPS WHO WOULD REAP A GOOD RICE CROP. OVERALL FORMAL ACTIONS OF THE CENTRAL GOVERNMENT INVOLVING THE PROVINCIAL GOVERNORS IS DISCUSSED IN PARA (2) ABOVE. IN CONSULTATION WITH APPROPRIATE LAO GOVERNMENT COUNTERPARTS, THE SITUATION AMONG THE REFUGEES IN EACH REGION OF LAOS WAS EVALUATED AND THE FOLLOWING SPECIFIC REDUCTIONS IN RICE DISTRIBUTION
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(5) IT IS THE BELIEF OF THE U.S. MISSION IN LAOS THAT VERY FEW OF THE 218,683 REFUGEES THAT WERE ON OCTOBER 26, 1973 BUT ARE NOT NOW ON THE FOOD-SUPPORT ROLLS BECAUSE THEY HAVE ACQUIRED RICE OF THEIR OWN FROM A BUMPER 1973-74 HARVEST WILL RETURN TO THE FOOD-SUPPORT ROLLS DURING 1974. THE HARVEST YIELD DID VARY FROM AREA TO AREA IN LAOS AND SOME REFUGEES HAD MORE LAND AVAILABLE FOR PLANTING THAN OTHERS, AND THEREFORE SOME OF THE REFUGEES ARE EXPECTED TO RUN OUT OF THEIR RICE STORES BEFORE THE NEXT HARVEST. THE BEST ESTIMATE OF THESE NUMBER OF REFUGEES WE EXPECT WILL NEED TO

RETURN TO THE FOOD-SUPPORT ROLLS PRIOR TO NEXT HARVEST IS APPROXIMATELY 40,000, OR ONLY ABOUT 18PERCENT OF THOSE WHO LEFT THE FOOD-SUPPORT ROLLS THIS 1973-74 HARVEST SEASON. WE BELIEVE THAT THE PERIOD OF TIME EVEN THESE REFUGEES MAY NEED ADDITIONAL INTERIM FOOD SUPPORT**WILL LIKELY NOT BE MORE THAN FOUR MONTHS AT THE MOST PRIOR TO THEIR NEXT HARVEST.

B. ALLEGATION: "AMERICAN OFFICIALS SAY MANY REFUGEES ARE SELLING THEIR RICE HARVEST AND THEN -- THEIR OWN RICE GONE -- RUNNING TO U.S. OFFICIALS FOR RICE TO EAT."

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COMMENT: NO LAO REFUGEES WHO HARVESTED THEIR OWN RICE AND ARE NO LONGER ON T * FOOD-SUPPORT ROLLS (SINCE OCTOBER) HAVE AS YET RUN TO ANY U.S. OFFICIAL FOR RICE TO EAT.

C. ALLEGATION: "THIS SITUATION CAME TO LIGHT AFTER CORRESPONDENTS NOTICED SACKS OF RICE PILED FOR SALE AND BEING PICKED UP BY TRUCKS ALONG THE DIRT HIGHWAY CONNECTING VIENTIANE AND THE NORTH LAOS TOWN OF VANG VIENG."; AND THE IMMEDIATELY FOLLOWING ALLEGED QUOTE OF A U.S. OFFICIAL: "WHAT YOU SAW WAS THIS YEAR'S TABLE RICE BEING PEDDLED. IN A FEW MONTHS TYEY'LL BE COMING ROUND ASKING FOR EMERGENCY HELP WITH RICE BECAUSE THEY ARE SHORT."

COMMENT: ACCORDING TH THE U.S. OFFICIAL IN THE AREA VISITED AND PRESUMABLY REFERRED TO BY ARBUCKLE, HIS RECOLLECTION OF THE CONVERSATION DIFFERED SOMEWHAT FROM THAT INDICATED AS A DIRECT QUOTE. SPECIFICALLY THIS U.S. OFFICIAL RECOLLECTS POINTING OUT THAT THE PEOPLE IN THE VANG VIENG AREA WERE SELLING MORE RICE **AN HE RLG AND HE THOUGHT WAS GOOD FOR THEM, AND THAT A CAMPAIGN WAS STARTED (THIS WAS IN EARL*-NOVEMBER) TO GET THE PEOPLE I* THE AREA TO HOLD ON TO?THEIR RICE. THIS OFFICIAL ALSO RECOLLECTS MENTIONING TO ARBUCKLE THE SPECIFIC LAO OFFICIALS WHO WERE CONSCIOUS OF AND WORKING O THE PROBLEM.

THE MAIN POINT TO RECOGNIZE, HOWEVER, IS NOT WHO MADE THEM NOR HOW THE STATEMENTS WERE MADE, BUT RATHER THAT ARBUCKLE IS GENERALIZING FROM ACTIONS OF A RELATIVELY SMALL GROUP OF REFUGEES AND GIVING THE IMPRESSION THAT SALES OF RICE BY REFUGEES IS A WIDESPREAD PHENOMENON AMONG ALL REFUGEES THROUGHOUT LAOS. THE LATER IMPLICATION IS PATENTLY EXAGGERATED, PARTICULARLY SINCE EVEN THE REFUGEES OF THE HIN THIT AREA (TO WHOM ARBUCKLE WAS REFERRING) AS OF THIS DATE, HAVE NOT SHOWN

ANY SIGNS OF MAKING REPRESENTATIONS TO LAO OR USAID
OFFICIALS TO RECEIVE FREE RICE.

D. ALLEGATION: THE ARTICLE ALLEGES THAT THE SITUATION
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AND "FAULT" LIES IN MANY PLACES: THE "U.S. AGENCY FOR
INTERNATIONAL DEVELOPMENT IN VIENTIANE"; "GROUPS
SUCH AS SEN. EDWARD KENNEDY'S SUBCOMMITTEE ON
REFUGEES IN WASHINGTON"; "THE LAO SOCIAL WELFARE
MINISTRY"; "SOME CORRUPTION IN THE DEALING" BY LAO
OFFICIALS; "AID'S OWN POOR PERSONNEL DISTRIBUTION"
WHICH ENCOURAGES "PASSING THE BUCK"; "TOP HEAVY"
AID AMERICAN PERSONNEL IN VIENTIANE; AND CUTS IN AID'S
"KEY FIELD STAFF".

COMMENT: "THIS SITUATION" AND ALL OF THESE SO-CALLED
"FAULTS" PRESUMABLY ARE RELATED TO THE CENTRAL
THEME OF THE ARBUCKLE ARTICLE, I.E., THAT LAO
REFUGEES ARE SELLING THEIR OWN RICE, THEN ASKING THE
U.S. FOR MORE FOOD AID. AS INDICATED ABOVE WITH REF-
ERENCE TO RICE SALES BY REFUGEES, IT HAS YET TO BE
DEMONSTRATED THAT ANY RICE SALES BY LAO REFUGEES
HAVE BEEN SIGNIFICANT OR WILL RESULT IN SUCH REFUGEES
RETURNING TO THE FOOD SUPPORT ROLLS -- LET ALONE
ANY QUESTION OF "FAULT".

E. ALLEGATION: "FOR EXAMPLE, THE U.S. POST IN THE
VANG VIENG AREA IS BEING CLOSED OUT. WITH AT
LEAST \$80,000 INVOLVED IN RICE COSTS IT WOULD SEEM MORE
ECONOMICAL TO CUT HALF A DOZEN U.S. OFFICER PERSONNEL
IN VIENTIANE."

COMMENT: CONTRARY TO THE SEEMING PURPORT OF THE
ARTICLE, THE REASON FOR CLOSING THE USAID FIELD POST
AT VANG VIENG WOULD BETTER BE DESCRIBED AS A SUCCESS
STORY RATHER THAN WHAT IS IMPLIED AS A MISTAKE IN
MANAGEMENT. NONE OF THE REFUGEES IN THE TWO AREAS
THAT WERE SUPPORTED BY THE USAID FROM THE VANG VIENG
FIELD POST -- HIN THIT AND MUONG KASSY - - IS NOW (AS OF
JANUARY 8, 1974) RECEIVING ANY FOOD OR OTHER ASSISTANCE
AS REFUGEES. NOR, BARING ANY UNFORESEEN RESUMPTION
OF HOSTILITIES OR NATURAL DISASTERS, DOES THE U.S.
MISSION EXPECT THAT THESE FORMER REFUGEES WILL RE-
QUIRE OTHER THAN NORMAL GOVERNMENT SERVICES AND
RURAL DEVELOPMENT ASSISTANCE IN THE FUTURE
AS PART OF A REGULAR ECONOMIC ASSISTANCE PROGRAM
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CARRIED OUT THROUGH JOINT PROGRAMS WITH THE LAO
GOVERNMENT.

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TO SECSTATE WASHDC PRIORITY 7209

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F. ALLEGATION: "FURTHER, U. S.OFFICIALS SAY, ATTEMPTS
TO CUT THE RICE DOLE HAVE BEEN STALLED BY CHARGES
FROM WASHINGTON, PARTICULAR ROM THE SENATE SUB-
COMMITTEE ON REFUGEES, THAT U.S. AID ISN'T DOING
ENOUGH FOR THE WAR WORN REFUGEES."

COMMENT: SINCE THE "U.S. OFFICIALS" REFERRED TO ARE
ANONYMOUS, ARBUCKLE'S ALLEGED STATEMENTS BY THESE
OFFICIALS CANNOT BE VERIFIED. THE OFFICIAL U.S. MISSION,
HOWEVER, KNOWS OF NO SUCH "CHARGES" FROM WASHINGTON.
ON THE OTHER HAND, OVER THE PAST SEVERAL YEARS THIS
MISSION HAS AGREED WITH, INDEED RECOMMENDED?, THAT
A FUNDAMENTAL OBJECTIVE OF THE U.S. PROGRAM IN LAOS
BE TO DO AS MUCH AS POSSIBLE AND REASONABLE FOR THE
L*O REFUGEES WHO HAVE BEEN FORCED BY THE WAR TO
DEPEND UPON THE ROYAL LAO GOVERNMENT FOR THEIR VERY
EXISTENCE.

G. ALLEGATION: "THIS HAS LED TO A SITUATION WHERE
LOCAL FARMERS ARE HURT BY BEING UNABLE TO

COMPETE WITH THE NOW "WEALTHIER REFUGEES" STICKING
ON U.S. AID ROLLS".

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COMMENT: IN THIS STATEMENT IT IS NOTED THAT ARBUCKLE
DOESN'T USE HIS MUCH-EMPLOYED JOURNALISTIC DEVICE
OF ATTRIBUTING IT TO "AN AMERICAN OR U.S. OFFICIALS".
IT IS PURE CONJECTURE ON HIS PART, AND TO OUR KNOWLEDGE
CANNOT BE BACKED UP BY ANY CONVINCING EVIDENCE.

H. ALLEGATION: "TO MAKE MATTERS WORSE, THE REFUGEES
NOT ONLY SELL RICE FROM THE CROP BUT ALSO SOME
OF THE AID RICE THEY ARE GIVEN, U.S. AID SOURCES SAY."

COMMENT: THIS IS A SAFE ALLEGATION FOR ANYONE TO
MAKE OF A PROGRAM THE SIZE AND SPREAD OF THE REFUGEE
PROGRAM IN LAOS. INSTANCES OF SALES AND ATTEMPTED
SALES OF U.S. DONATED RICE AND PL 480 FOODS HAVE BEEN
NOTED OVER THE COURSE OF THE PAST SEVERAL YEARS.
THESE INSTANCES ARE A MATTER OF PUBLIC RECORD, AND
THEY ARE MINOR BY COMPARISON WITH THE SIZE AND COM-
PLEXITY OF THE DISTRIBUTION SYSTEM AS WELL AS THE
UNUSUALLY DIFFICULT CIRCUMSTANCES OF IMPLE-
MENTING A REFUGEE RELIEF PROGRAM IN THE MIDST OF AN
ACTIVE WAR PRIOR TO THE 1973 CEASEFIRE. THE GOOD
RECORD OF THE USAID AND THE RLG IN THIS RESPECT HAS
BEEN RECORDED NOT ONLY BY INTERNAL AUDIT FINDINGS,
BUT BY GENERAL ACCOUNTING OFFICE REVIEWS OF THE
LAOS REFUGEE PROGRAM.

I. ALLEGATION: "VILLAGERS BELIEVING U.S. AID IS TO
GO ON FOREVER ARE NOT USING THE PRESENT PLENTY TO
BECOME SELF-SUFFICIENT AND COULD FACE A STARVATION
CRUNCH WHEN THE AMERICANS FINALLY PULL OUT OF HERE."

COMMENT: WE ASSUME THE VILLAGERS REFERRED TO HERE
ARE REFUGEE VILLAGERS. FOR THOSE VILLAGERS AMONG
THE REFUGEES WHO MAY NOT BE TAKING ADVANTAGE OF
THE PRESENT HARVEST TO BOTH FEED THEMSELVES AND
STORE UP FOR NEXT YEARS PLANTING AND PERHAPS.
AGAINST THE "RAINY DAY", WE ARE IN AGREEMENT WITH
ARBUCKLE. FORTUNATELY, TO THE BEST OF OUR KNOW-
LEDGE, SUCH VILLAGERS AMONG THE LAO REFUGEES ARE
A VERY SLIM MINORITY.

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II. RE THE AP QUOTE IN PARA 3, REF A, IT DOES NOT MAKE IT CLEAR (IF INDEED IT IS MENT TO) THAT THE CHINESE MERCHANTS FROM THAILAND ARE BUYING ALL THIS RICE FROM REFUGEES. THE BORDER BETWEEN LAOS AND THAILAND IS POROUS AND SUCH EXPORTS OF RICE TO THAILAND AS MAY BE MOVING ACROSS THE MEKONG ARE ILLEGAL. LAO CUSTOMS SERVICE RECORDS INCLUDE NO EXPORTS OF RICE FROM LAOS DURING PAST THREE MON HS. THE LARGEST REFUGEE AREAS IN LAOS, BY AND LARGE, ARE NOT CONTIGUOUS TO THE MEKONG (GENERALLY CHOICE LAND IN CULTIVABLE AREAS OF LAOS) AND THE PRICES THE "CHINESE MERCHANTS" MIGHT PAY TO SUCH REFUGEES THEY MAY CONTACT - - CONSIDERING COSTS INVOLVED FOR TRANSPORTATION AND ILLEGAL EXPORT -- MAKES IT EXTREMELY DOUBTFUL

EVEN IF SOME REFUGEES WERE SELLING THEIR RICE HARVEST THAT THE REFUGEES WOULD BE MAKING A "BUNDLE" OUT OF THE TRANSACTION. THE PRICE FOR RICE IN THAILAND AND LAOS IS GENERALLY EQUIVALENT. RICE PRICES IN LAOS ARE FOR THE MOST PART DEPRESSED OR INCREASED IN CONFORMANCE WITH THAI PRICES GIVEN THE NEAR IMPOSSIBILITY OF EFFECTIVELY CONTROLLING TRAFFIC ACROSS THE MANY MILES OF THE MEKONG BORDER. THEREFORE IT IS DIFFUCULT TO PROJECT A HIGHLY PROFITABLE, SIGNIFICANT MAGNITUDE OF RICE PURCHASES FROM REFUGEES IN THE MANNER POSTULATED IN THE AP QUOTE.

RE USAID PURCHASES OF RICE, THE FACTS ARE THAT THE LAST TWO CONTRACTS MADE IN THAILAND FOR RICE TO FEED REFUGEES WERE MADE IN SEPTEMBER, 1973 FOR 12,000 METRIC TONS (BEFORE THE HARVEST AND IN THE MIDST OF WORLD SHORTAGES) AND THEN THE SECOND ON NOVEMBER 19, 1973 FOR 7,000 METRIC TONS (IN THE MIDST OF THIS YEAR'S HARVEST SEASON). THE PRICE WAS RELATIVELY HIGH (FROM USAID'S POINT OF VIEW) FOR THE SEPTEMBER CONTRACT DUE TO A WORLD-WIDE SHORTAGE-- \$241 PER METRIC TON. EVEN SO, THIS NEGOTIATED PRICE WAS \$79 PER METRIC TON BELOW THE THAI COMMERCIAL EXPORT PRICE AT THAT TIME. THE NOVEMBER CONTRACT, HOWEVER, WAS NEGOTIATED AT \$165 PER METRIC TON -- \$85/ PER METRIC TON LESS THAN THE SEPTEMBER USAID CONTRACT PRICE, AND \$155 PER METRIC TON BELOW LIMITED OFFICIAL USE LIMITED OFFICIAL USE

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THE PREVAILING THAI COMMERCIAL EXPORT PRICE AT THAT TIME. IN OTHER WORDS, BECAUSE OF THE VERY HIGH YIELDS IN THAILAND AS WELL AS LAOS THIS CURRENT HARVEST, THE PRICE OF RICE TO USAID DECREASED AND, AS OF THIS TIME, LOOKS AS THOUGH IT MAY DECREASE SLIGHTLY MORE BY THE TIME THE NEXT USAID CONTRACTS FOR REFUGEE RICE MAY BE NEGOTIATED IN THAILAND. DECONTROL 1/8/75.

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Message Attributes

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